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## **Love stories of occupation: storytelling and the counter-geopolitics of intimacy**

**Abstract:** Though research on Israel/Palestine often privileges the macro-geopolitical perspective, a growing body of work has begun to catalogue the ways in which the violence of occupation is carried out through intimate spaces and practices. However, often missing from such accounts is an understanding of intimacy as a counter-veiling political force. Looking at the 'Love Under Apartheid' project in Palestine, and queer anti-occupation organizing in Israel, this essay considers how storytelling can serve as both a research methodology and political intervention changing the way geopolitical stories are told and unfold.

**Keywords:** Love; Storytelling; Israel/Palestine

The popular geopolitical notion that mutual ignorance perpetuates the Israeli-Palestinian "conflict" is belied by the intimate cultural knowledge that the occupier has used to divorce a people from the land, and that the occupied have acquired in order to survive. The very foundation of a Jewish homeland was itself predicated on the necessary destruction of the Palestinian household; the threat of rape was strategically used during the *nakba* of 1948 with the idea that Arab fathers would sooner surrender their land than imperil the honour and integrity of their wives and daughters (Warnock, 1990, Peteet, 1991, Holt, 2003). As the site of biological and cultural reproduction, the intimate spaces of the family/home continue to be prime targets of colonial violence in Palestine (Abdo, 2008, Harker, 2011). Sexual violence against young men and women continues to be used as an interrogation tactic (B'Tselem, 2013); while family separations caused by imprisonment and restrictive residency laws serve to disrupt Palestinian family life.

Israeli feminist research has similarly sought to link the violence of occupation and domestic violence within Israeli homes. Beyond arguments that soldiers "bring home" the war through domestic violence, feminist and queer scholars have argued that militarism begins at home with the foundational hierarchy of heteronormative patriarchy (see Pain, this volume). However, while there is increasing awareness about the intimate connections between domestic and colonial violence, less often considered is the role of intimacy, familial or otherwise, in potentially confronting such forms of violence and oppression. Beyond sentimentalist notions of love conquering all, how might interpersonal love challenge the occupation by mobilizing affinities and sustaining resilience? Further, how might individual love stories that complicate the neat colonial demarcations of land and people pose a narrative challenge to the geographies of occupation?

Geographers have lately begun to grapple with the changing nature of intimacy in the context of global mobility and mediated proximity (Valentine, 2006, Walsh, 2009), as well as love itself as a subject of geopolitical inquiry (Smith, 2011, Smith, 2012). Drawing from political theorists of affect like Ahmed and Sedgwick, Morrison et al (2013) urge geographers not to reflexively dismiss love as apolitical at best, or at worst an anti-politics concealing heteronormative patriarchy. Instead, they argue for love as a fundamentally political spatial relation involved in the formation of subjectivity, and the production of boundaries, spaces, places, and affinities. Paradoxically, love is something that is, at once, deeply personal, universally recognized, and yet culturally and historically specific. This paradox is true too for the stories we tell about love. As

Cameron (2012) points out, stories are both singular expressions of particular, individual experiences, but also indicative of their social context and cultural conventions.

This productive tension is at the heart of a project called Love Under Apartheid. Launched by US-based Palestinian rights activist Tanya Keilani on Valentine's Day 2012, the project features the stories of couples and families fractured by the occupation. As Keilani explains in the project description, "Thinking about occupation historically and in the abstract, we may not comprehend the extent to which it affects the most private and intimate parts of Palestinian lives" (Keilani, 2012). These love stories help to communicate "the extent to which the Israeli apartheid system affects individuals by restricting a deeply personal right: their right to love" (ibid). The right to love is a right to self-determination, and crucially the right to a future. Futurity features prominently in the narratives. As Keilani again explains: "When we find a partner, we think about our futures: where will we live; what kind of home we will create; would we like children; if so, how many - but planning a future together isn't the same for Palestinians" (ibid). The language of love allows for an intimate proximity with the Palestinian narrators, too often cast as the objects of history, here narrating their personal struggles with occupation, but also their personal stories of love.

In this project, love is deployed as a counter-geopolitical force in three ways: 1) Individual love stories directly confront and seek to overcome the division of Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem, and historic Palestine; 2) The stories themselves seek to create affinity and a kind of intimate knowledge of Palestinians among a global public used to seeing them as "Other"; and 3) The stories seek to make intimate the abstract language of universal rights through an appeal to the universal experience of love.

However, this emphasis on personal romance takes as universal the notion of love as individual desire (perhaps signalling the changing nature of intimacy in Palestine and the role of digital communication in facilitating and narrating romantic love). This universalizing of particular experiences of love likewise risks reifying heteronormative constructions of love and family life. What of queer love under apartheid? Love stories which are critical of Israeli militarism are becoming increasingly main-stream within Israeli gay culture. Two recent films, *The Bubble* (2006) and *Out in the Dark* (2013), explore the complexities of gay relationships between Israeli and Palestinian men. Both films cast a critical light on the Israeli occupation and the vulnerability of Palestinian gay men to abuse by Israeli authorities. However, the stories also trade in the clichés of innocent love caught between two warring factions – Israeli militarism and Palestinian extremism – reinforcing the notion of the occupation as a symmetrical conflict, with "bad guys on both sides" ultimately portraying liberal Tel Aviv as the sensible middle-ground. Depicted as such, stories of Israeli-Palestinian queer love are insufficiently critical of the power relations that undergird the occupation and enable the occupier alone to narrate such stories. Nevertheless, both these examples illustrate how stories in general, and perhaps love stories especially, are potent counter-geopolitical narratives. Such stories help us achieve new understandings of the everyday realities of occupation. They serve as affective disruptions to dominant narrative representations of Palestine, with the potential of collapsing social distance and creating new, intimate political affinities, and perhaps, in the process, enacting new subject positions.

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